



**A NATIONAL COMPACT:
A submission from the national, state and
territory volunteering peak centres**

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Authorised by:

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A response from national, state and territory volunteering peak centres

On behalf of state and territory volunteer peak centres, Volunteering Australia applauds the Australian Government for exploring ways to develop an invigorated and stronger relationship with the not-for-profit sector based on partnership and respect.

Volunteers are necessary to a functioning Australian society. Volunteers and volunteering not-for-profit organisations are the backbone of a wide range of sectors, including: community and welfare; sport and recreation; international development; education; environment; health; culture and arts; animal welfare; politics and unions; science and emergency services.

Volunteers play a vital role in service provision, innovation and advocacy. This submission seeks to position volunteers and volunteering as a key contributor to a new and enduring relationship with government. It represents the views of the state and national volunteer peak bodies of Australia and is made in response to the call for initial views on the development of a National Compact.

As articulated by Senator Ursula Stephens (2008) in her address to the first consultation on a National Compact we agree that a strengthened relationship will reflect mutual shared values in a new partnership that will:

- create a sustainable environment;
- reduce disadvantage;
- create opportunities for social, cultural and economic participation;
- build social cohesion by respecting all cultures;
- respect for the independent voice of the not-for-profit sector.

THE NATIONAL AND STATE VOLUNTEERING CENTRES SEEK:

- Recognition that volunteers are major contributors to the Australian workforce . Their status as such needs to be formally acknowledged as their involvement will be integral to the success of a National Compact
- Understanding that people make change happen. Therefore we seek ongoing research into volunteering to explore how people become volunteers, innovatively respond to unmet needs and often are the first to identify new needs
- Recognition that volunteers are innovative and develop new programs, play a vital advocacy role as well as play a pivotal role in service provision
- Commitment by all political parties that the National Compact will be honoured, irrespective of which party is in government
- Sufficient new funds and resources to develop the National Compact be allocated rather than existing funding be taken from the sector
- Drawing on the experience of other Compacts we seek an ongoing educative process that incorporates all media e.g.: television, radio, all

print media (national, regional, rural, local, ethno-specific), web, etc. This is necessary so that people feel engaged and aware of the relevance of the National Compact to them and their communities

- Sustainability of funding for volunteer involving organisations
- Support of peak bodies in establishing greater and stronger sectoral networks
- Involvement of peak bodies in all sectors in the education, information and evaluation of the National Compact
- Ongoing research and consultation with volunteers throughout the life of the National Compact
- Protection of the independence and rights of all parties
- Recognition of the ability and expertise of the volunteering sector to contribute and be consulted on all government policy that relates to volunteering
- Representation of all volunteering areas (broader than community and welfare services) into the development of this partnership
- Consideration of the needs of small and emerging volunteer involving groups and organisations
- Involvement of indigenous communities and culturally and linguistically diverse communities

VOLUNTEERS AND VOLUNTEERING – A RATIONALE FOR INCLUDING THE VOICE OF VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers are vital to the social, cultural and economic wellbeing of this nation. Over one third of the adult population freely chooses, without monetary reward to provide services and advocacy across the whole spectrum of our civil society. Volunteers are to be found in science, education, sport and recreation, culture and arts, politics, local government, unions, the environment, emergency services, health, international development, animal welfare and of course, community services.

The measurement of this involvement has gained national attention only over the last decade. The volunteering sector is known to include more than five million volunteers over the age of 18 years. This represents 34% of the adult population. While in some instances the number of volunteers fluctuates, volunteers provide approximately 713 million volunteer hours per annum.

In 2000, Ironmonger estimated that volunteering was responsible for around \$42 billion of economic activity annually. A national extrapolation of Ironmonger's recent research on the economic value of volunteering in Queensland suggests that this figure increased to \$70 billion in 2006. Further this figures does not incorporate the flow-on value of volunteering, for example the reduction in climate change by environmental volunteer effort.

ABS data from 1999-2000 shows that although most not-for-profit organisations (across a range of industry sectors) do not have paid staff, they are responsible for 3.3% of GDP, and if you include the financial value of volunteer activity, the figure rises to 4.7%. Ironmonger's most recent research estimates the value of volunteering to be at or above 7% of GDP for 2006.

There are an estimated 700,000 not-for-profit organisations in Australia (ACCROD 2003), the majority of which involve volunteers in some capacity. This is one and a half times the number of Australian businesses represented by the Construction and Property Services Industry Skills Council, five times the number of businesses represented by the Agri-Food Industry Skills Council and almost ten times the number of businesses represented by the Manufacturing Skills Council. In recent research undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) it was found that there are 20 times the number of volunteers than there are paid employees.

Further, while we have cause to celebrate the estimated total of not-for-profit organisations, i.e. of the 700,000 in Australia, approximately 380,000 are incorporated (ABS 2002) while 41,000 have an Australian Business Number (ABS 2008). This means that while these organisations can easily be counted, contacted, informed and included there is a real danger that the remaining thousands of not-for-profit organisations and volunteers in Australia are not easily counted, contacted or informed and may not be included. Indeed there is danger that large numbers of organisations and volunteers will be inadvertently excluded simply due to lack of research and knowledge.

It is not just the work volunteers do that makes their contribution valuable to the good functioning of Australian society, it is the volunteers themselves who must be considered, included and consulted.

For a National Compact to attain relevance, endurance and respect it is vital that volunteers from all sectors be engaged. While initial information from the ACOSS consultation has been positive and optimistic we assert that any new partnership between the not-for-profit sector and government must be representative of all the sectors where volunteers are involved.

A partnership made between government and a not-for-profit sector that focuses on the portfolio of one government department would continually underestimate the diversity and breadth of volunteering. Too often not-for-profit organisations involving volunteers find that compliance is hampered by the varying requirements of each department. In a recent survey regarding compliance requirements of 14 not-for-profits, Ryan, Newton and McGregor-Lowndes (2008) found that reporting to government required on average 143 hours per year. This figure does not include the resource investment required to prepare funding/grant submissions.. Accountability for spending public funds is, of course necessary, but the duplication and differing requirements of various levels of government detracts from those funds being fully utilised for the work for which it was intended.

Implicit in this is a call for greater communication between all levels of government, federal, state and local, and also across departments at each level. In this instance, while the proposed National Compact deals with the potential partnership between the federal tier of government and the not-for-profit sector only, this may open the way for greater communication with the other two tiers of government on working with the not-for-profit sector. This

would have the added benefit of minimising duplication of process between not-for-profits and various levels of government.

We seek a whole of government partnership with volunteering in Australia.

BEYOND A NATIONAL AGENDA ON VOLUNTEERING

The volunteering sector was engaged in a national consultation in the International Year of Volunteers 2001. A legacy of the consultations was the development of *A National Agenda on Volunteering*. Community, volunteer-involving organisations, business and government were called to work together and adopt actions under six main objectives.

1. Publicly respect and value in enduring, formal and tangible ways, the essential contribution that volunteers make to building and sustaining the Australian community.
2. Ensure that volunteers have legal status and are afforded protection through every piece of legislation and public policy that affects them and their work
3. Ensure that all new legislation, by-laws and public policies developed at any level of government, which may affect volunteers and their work, work only to facilitate and sustain volunteering.
4. Acknowledge that the activity of volunteering is not without cost and develop means by which Australian volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations are supported and funded to provide valuable services.
5. Ensure excellence in all levels of volunteer involvement and volunteer management in order to encourage, protect and enhance the work of volunteers.
6. Ensure that volunteering is a potent, dynamic and unifying social force for community benefit by acknowledging that it is a diverse and evolving activity.

Though progress has been made in addressing actions under each of the major objectives (Volunteering Australia 2004), it has been a result of persistent effort within the sector rather than a co-ordinated and strategic response across all sectors and government.

We call upon government to provide a co-ordinated and strategic response in a strengthened relationship between volunteers and government.

LEARNING FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF EXISTING COMPACTS

Australia, as it develops a national framework, is able to take advantage of the experiences from existing international policy agreements, such as that of the UK and Canada. On the home front we are able to examine the experiences, where they are similar and where they vary, in developing a national framework.

There are certain similarities between the beginning of the UK Compact and the current Australian situation. For example, the Howard Government was accused of pressuring not-for-profits not to criticise government policy or risk losing funding. One of the first assurances made by the Rudd Government was to assure not-for-profit organisations that advocacy would not incur a 'gag'.

To paraphrase Edgar (2008), it is one thing to make a great Compact document, it is another to make it work. The UK Compact continues to have its detractors. One aspect of the implementation concerns how the Compact is taken up at the local level where the majority of 'on the ground' volunteering takes place. The UK experience also points to difficulty in implementing the Compact to include culturally and linguistically diverse groups within the community. Considering the diversity of the Australian population, it will be of paramount importance to include volunteers from all cultures in any Australian model and to include indigenous models of community action and support.

Both the UK and Canada have found the need to set up dispute resolution systems. Feedback from Australian experiences would suggest that communication, education, adequate resourcing and mediation or other form of conflict resolution be included in the design of any new relationship.

Developed during the International Year of the Volunteer (2001), the Canadian Accord has resulted in increased government consultations with the not-for-profit sector but when the Auditor General revealed weaknesses in federal funding, the result created great micromanagement and a 'general reluctance of government departments to take any risks' which Elston (2006) disregards the tenets of the Accord.

While Australia should not be bound by the parameters of existing international or state compacts it is both valuable and necessary to identify through research and consultation the success factors and impediments to achieve the best possible outcomes.

Australian state and territory experience of agreements, compacts, commitments and partnerships

In Australia, we have had a history of state provision of human services. Various terms agreements, compacts, commitments or partnerships, all have the aim of brokering stronger relationships. Each state and territory has developed such protocols.

For example:

- Victoria where 63% of not-for-profit organisations surveyed in 2005 were satisfied with consultation processes;
- NSW where workers in the community sector consider *Working Together* to be 'toothless' (Casey et al 2008);
- SA where the Advancing the Community Together Agreement is driven by control from government, resulting in a parallel system rather than partnership (SACOSS 2008);
- ACT where ensuring that volunteering is given real consideration and not passing lip service in local Social Plans continues to be an issue;
- NT where improving relations with indigenous communities is a key factor;

It would appear that such agreements around Australia are still evolving and have much to offer the national process.

We have the opportunity to undertake extensive research and learn the lessons of Australian states and territories. This is an opportunity to develop with volunteers and not-for-profit organisations a better and stronger relationship than has ever existed.

From analysis of existing compacts both at international and state level (Edgar 2008; Casey et al 2008) common success factors can be identified and adopted:

- A 'champion' able to drive the process and promote the Compact nationally
- Adequate and ongoing resources
- A national education and information process that engages volunteers and the public at large

While it is possible to develop a National Compact document, impediments to that document being translated into action and acceptance by volunteers include:

- Duplication – each state and territory government has developed its own partnership model for working with the not-for-profit sector. These relationships are all different as they endeavour to reflect the needs of the people of that state or territory. The development of a National Compact runs the risk to creating a layer of duplication leading to confusion and non-adherence which could be seen as another level of "bureaucratisation".
- Engagement with the whole of government – currently the driving force behind this move for a strengthened relationship is the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs with involvement by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Recognition is required that other government departments impact on volunteers and volunteering. Without the visible

involvement of all government departments there is a danger that any compact developed will only be associated to welfare and similar community services.

REALISING THE OPPORTUNITY AND POTENTIAL OF A NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP

The primary model being considered for development is to some extent based on the flagship of compacts, namely the UK Compact. However other models do exist and it is possible to develop an Australian model that draws from all international, state and territory research evidence.

We need time to investigate; time to educate; time to plan and time to promote so that an Australian national partnership benefits and is valued by volunteers to build capacity across our nation.

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